

January, 2002

How pure a thing is joy!

By Sandra Brown-Williams

The very bird, grown taller as he sings, steels his form straight up. though he is captive, his mighty singing says satisfaction is a lowly thing, how pure a thing is joy!

from "What Are Years", Marianne Moore (1941)

This is the fifth season I have had the opportunity to prepare a youth chorus for a production of the Nutcracker. This year ten new students join the ranks of forty veteran chorus members from past years. Grades seven through twelve are represented. Eight members are singing for the fifth time, having been seventh graders when they started. Those members come to one of the three pick up rehearsals offered. New members attend all three pick up rehearsals.

If they have performed only once, they attend two pick up rehearsals. In addition, they all have one rehearsal in the hall, a dress rehearsal, and two to four performances. Students choose the performances that work best with their family holiday schedule. The formula works well for teaching vocal and musical independence. This year about twenty-four students will attend each pick up rehearsal. All fifty chorus members will not be together until the rehearsal in the performance hall. Each performance will have a slightly different combination of voices ranging between thirty-five and forty-five singers.

Every year I am impressed with how much the students learn from singing those one hundred and sixteen measures on the "ah" vowel. First of all, the measures do not happen all at once. The singers must count carefully the sixteen or sixty measures of rests while the orchestra plays. The first thirty-two measures are sung in triple meter, while the last fifty two are in duple. Although section A in triple meter happens twice, section B is in duple and begins on the same pitches as section A, but then the pitches change after five measures. There are phrases that require staggered breathing and phrases that require the singer to sing throughout an extended range with fluidity. The first three sections are in the key of G major, and the last section ends in E major. The sopranos end on a high G sharp with the altos on the E a third below. This challenges the second sopranos and altos to sing with head tone

throughout the piece in order that the last chord be perfectly in tune for a full eight measures. Prior to the initial entrance, the chorus must sit and watch the ballet for fifty minutes before singing!

The possibilities for teaching are absolutely delicious! There is no hiding behind leaders within the group. In the performance the students are in balconies on each side of the theater. They cannot depend on hearing one another and, because the orchestra is so far away, what they hear in the hall and what they see from the conductor is not the same. The beautiful ballet with full costumes, snowflakes, and lights challenges their ability to focus on the hands of the conductor. The veterans tell tales of trips under the stage without lights, arriving in the balcony only to have a patron say, "But I sit here every year. This is my seat!" I chuckled when I heard one of the chorus members say to someone new, "The rehearsal with the orchestra is important for us, and we have to break in a new conductor this year." The veterans remember the few times a conductor has forgotten to cue them.

As a teacher, each year I come away from the experience with new ideas. This year because of Marianne Moore's quote, "how pure a thing is joy!", we rediscovered the challenge of having the joy before we sing. We practiced breathing and smiling a gracious free smile while being seated, then breathing deeply while smiling as we rose from our chairs at the exact measure that marked our music cue. We talked of letting the joy greet the vocal sound. One could feel the freshness and vitality in the room. I believe if they do it all at the same time as we rehearsed, the audience will sense their presence before they produce their beautiful tones.

I began this article with a quote from Marianne Moore's poem. I read the excerpt to the chorus members at the rehearsals. Standing in the balcony, they are like that bird; in a way, they are captive. They must stand tall, straight up. It will not be acceptable to sing satisfactorily; their tones will only carry across the great hall if they are singing well. Each individual has to be singing well. Each individual has to count and watch the conductor. Each individual has to smile and breathe as she rises exactly at the appointed measure for standing. Each individual has to have joy! Not someone else's joy, but her very own. In my book, "There's a Place Where Children Go....and the Song Can Take You There," a seventh grade student is quoted after her experience of singing in the Nutcracker. She wrote:

“Our voices turned into a color. The color flew out from our balcony. From the other side of the theater, another color of voice, much as like ours, flew out. Our color of voices and their color of voices joined with the color of the orchestra. When it reached the stage, it bounced back, and the color flew all over the theater. That color of music was bright as day, even in the dark theater.”

If so much can be learned in a few measures on the “ah” vowel, then surely with all of our great repertoire and its myriad of sounds, we can teach better and better every time we come before our students. Certainly singing in a beautiful hall with an orchestra is special, but that is not what makes students sing well. Space can be very intimidating, especially if the acoustics do not allow chorus members to hear one another.

There are many places where choral directors can take their students for the opportunity to sing independently and joyfully. Find a space with good acoustics. Learn something new at every rehearsal. Learn from each performance. Our students will guide us. Their weaknesses will help us set goals. Their strengths will inspire us to be creative. We must teach well because “satisfaction is a lowly thing, how pure a thing is joy!”

Oregon ACDA Summer Workshop will present Don Brinegar as the headliner. The dates for the workshop are August 15-17, 2002, at University of Portland.

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